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Theatre Architecture in Ancient India

By V. RAGHAVAN, B.A. (HONS)

Mr. G. Venkatachalam says in his article on "Theatre Architecture" (Vol. I, No. 2. of the *Theatre*, page, 109): "Books are silent as to the nature of theatre crafts in Ancient India. The assumption is that Dramas and Musical Plays were enacted on temporarily constructed stages amidst quiet cool groves or by the side of village shrines. Though the names *rangabhumi* or *natakasala* connote some sort of architectural structures, there is so far no evidence to show the type and the details of constructive features. It is possible that like in Ancient Greece theatres in India were mere open-air theatres with no permanent stage fittings or specially constructed buildings. Village dramas of today may give us some idea of the stage craft in olden days." Then on page 112, he again says: "As noticed in the beginning of this article we are not certain today of the nature of Indian stages in olden days, except the bare information that like Greek theatres, they were open-air theatres amidst sylvan surroundings or near village shrines."

These remarks are painful to one who has some acquaintance with the Sanskrit texts on Dramaturgy. The author above referred to evidently knows no sources of knowledge on "Theatre Architecture" in Ancient India other than the *therukkuttus*—street-dramas of the villages where benches serve as the platform and wooden mortars (*ural*) serve as chairs, and the *kuttambalam* of the temples, as for instance in Malabar. Books are *not* silent as to the nature of the theatre crafts in Ancient India. There is ample evidence to show that the names *rangabhumi* and *natakasala* connote not 'some sort of architectural structures,' but well-planned, well-built, decorated, beautiful theatres. The types and the details of constructive features of the Indian theatres in olden times may be known by a reference

to the Sanskrit sources. This article proposes to examine the available Sanskrit texts on Theatre Architecture.

Dance and Music were highly-evolved Court arts in Ancient India. They were not the folk-art to be shown on the streets or near the village shrines. The palaces contained separate halls for *Natya*. The *Malavika Agnimitra* of Kalidasa furnishes us the information that the palace of the King had a *chitrasala* (painting hall) and a *prekshagara* (a hall for witnessing *Natya*). It is in this *prekshagara* that Malavika's dance is presented. There can be no mistaking this place to be a mere hall or 'some sort of architectural structure.' It is a perfect *natyasala*, there being mention of the green-room and the curtain. In act V of the *Sakuntala* it is said that Hamsapadika, the King's quondam sweetheart is singing in the *sangitasala*. Saradatanaya in his work on Dramaturgy, *Bhava-prakasa*, describes three types of theatres in the palace of the king, each for the presenting of a different kind of dance. At the beginning of his work he says that he wrote the book on seeing thirty different kinds of dramas presented by a proprietor named Divakara from whom he learnt the *natyaveda*. This Saradatanaya is assigned to A. D. 1175-1250. Narada's *Sangita-makaranda*, a very old work on Music, describes one type of theatre, giving its measurements, etc. The *Vishnudharmottara* describes two types of theatres. Lastly we have Bharata's *Natyasastra*, the earliest work on Drama, devoting one whole chapter to Theatre Architecture. Chapter 2. of the *Natyasastra*, gives three types of theatres, each again divided into three kinds according to their size and gives also measurement, etc, for each of these.

The verses in Chapter II, of the *Natyasastra* are confusing in some places. The great commentary on the *Natyasastra* by Acharya Abhinavagupta helps us a good deal in understanding Bharata. Dr. Keith's *Sanskrit Drama*, towards the end, contains a small section on stage architecture according to Bharata, but the account there is very meagre and sometimes mistaken also. Miss Godavari V. Ketkar has produced a study of the *Natyasastra*, the use of which book, however, is little to those who do not know Marathi in which it is written. Still those who want to have an idea of the types of

theatres in Ancient India may derive much benefit by referring to the very useful diagrams of Bharata's theatres given by Miss Ketkar in her book.

The sages request Bharata to speak of the theatre, it being the first requisite in *Natya*. Bharata says that the learned Visvakarman devised three types of theatres according to the *Sastras*, viz., *vikrashta*, i.e., rectangular, *chaturasra*, i.e., square, and *tryasra*, i.e., triangular. Dr. Keith does not say what the *vikrashta* means and wrongly translates *chaturasra* as 'rectangular.' Each of these three again falls into three kinds according to size: *jyeshtha*, i.e., biggest, *madhyama*, i.e., middle-sized, and *kaniyas*, i.e., small. Dr. Keith misses this second classification. Of these three, i.e., biggest, middle-sized, and small, Bharata for the sake of good acoustic effect asks us to choose the middle-sized. A reading of the verses here would give the idea that the biggest is for the *Devas*, the middle-sized for kings, and the small for the people. Bharata asks us not to vie with the *Devas* and their very big theatres, because we mortals must build with great trouble while they do things by mere wish. So Bharata recommends the middle-sized theatre to us. Abhinava's commentary here gives original interpretation. We are unable to decide whether that is Bharata's idea, but Abhinava gives us additional information, namely, that if Bharata assigns the biggest theatre to the *Devas*, it means that we should resort to the biggest to enact such kinds of dramas as the *Dima* in which occur fights between the *Devas* and the *asuras* and consequently much space is wanted. If we have to enact the romances of a king's private life, the middle-sized theatre is enough for our purpose. We must go to the small theatre when we intend staging such plays as the monologue, *Bhana* plays in which ordinary men and women are characters.

The biggest measures 108 *hastas* or 54 yards; the middle-sized 64 h or 32 yds., and the small 32 h or 16 yds. These may be of the shape of a rectangle or square or triangle. Bharata then picks out the middle-sized which he has already praised as the best from all points of view and gives its dimensions, dividing it into three according to shape, namely, rectangular, square, and triangular. The rectangular should be 64 h. long,

32 wide. This space should be divided into two, giving two squares, 32×32 . The front square should be made into the audience-hall. The other square should again be divided into two halves of 16×32 each. Of these two portions, the front half 16×32 should be made into two halves measuring 8×32 each. An eight-hastas square at the centre of the back half of these two portions should be made into the *rangasirsha*. The front half 8×32 should have at the centre the *rangapitha*, i.e., the stage proper, measuring 8×16 leaving at both the sides two verandahs of 8 h. square. The portion measuring 16×32 remaining at the back of the *rangasirsha* should be made into the *nepathyagriha*, the green-room with two doorways. The bewildering nature of this part of the *natyasastra* is plain when we see Abhinava giving numerous and differing views all over the chapter. Here especially he gives three other opinions of other scholars describing the measurements of the green-room, the *rangasirsha* and the *rangapitha* in three different ways. Abhinava himself bewilders us by giving a measurement of 64×64 h, which will mean a square theatre, though Bharata is speaking here of a rectangular theatre, 64×32 h. There should be two doorways to the green-room. The *rangasirsha* is to be a little higher, and here it is that the actors make offerings and *pūja* before the drama begins and wait during the drama when they have dressed themselves up. Abhinava says that if the stage is imagined as a man lying on his back, this space called 'the head of the stage' will look like his head.

The *chaturasra* measures 32 h, on both sides. In this type the *rangapitha* is smaller naturally. The entrance to the green-room should be only one. In other respects, the construction of this type should follow the instructions given as regards the rectangular. Just as in the rectangular type, the stage proper is also rectangular, in the square type the stage proper is square.

Then Bharata describes a *trysra*—triangular theatre. The speciality to be noted in its construction is that the *rangapitha* here is triangular and has an entrance into the green-room at its back angle.

As regards the entrance gates to the audience-hall, Abhinava

says that they may be three, perhaps one on each side. In the rectangular 'the head of the stage' is a little higher than the 'stage proper' while, in the square, both are on the same level.

As regards the size and measurement and types of theatres in general, Abhinava says that altogether eighteen kinds of theatres are possible as spoken of in the *Sastras*. Bharata himself says at the end of this chapter that there are many types of theatres and that other types must be constructed by learned men applying the instructions given above.

In a further chapter, Bharata says that we should resort to a rectangular stage to present dances involving much to-and-fro movements—*gata-agata prachara*, which are impossible on a stage of smaller width. He also says that in the square and the triangular stages the *chaturasra gati* only is possible.

There is also elaborate treatment of the number of pillars in the various portions of the theatre in each type, how and where they should be raised and what auspicious ceremonies should attend this *stambhasthapana*. Bharata dedicates four main pillars to the four castes even as portions of the whole theatre to the various gods for the sake of protection. There is absolutely no warrant for Dr. Keith to read here the idea that the dedication of the four main pillars also apportions those four places in the audience-hall for the four castes in the audience. Bharata speaks first that a good plot of ground should be chosen and cleared of all grass, shrubs, bones, skulls, etc. Music, *puja* and feast should attend the measurement-ceremony. The erection of the walls is then described. The whole hall must be richly decorated with wood-work, representing creepers, birds, animals, etc. The walls must be decorated with beautiful paintings of pictures of pleasure, of men and women and of creepers and trees, after the walls have been made smooth and white with *chunam*.

As regards the seating arrangements also, Bharata's theatre was perfect. He says that the seating arrangements should be in the form of a gallery—*sopanakriti*. The seats should be either of brick or of wood. They should be one and a half feet high above the ground, to give a good view of the *rangapitha*. The surface

of the *rangapitha* should not be like the *kurmapristha* (high at the centre and sloping on all sides like the back of a tortoise), or the *matsyapristha* (high along the centre and sloping on both sides like the back of a fish). It should be smooth like the surface of a mirror. Bharata says that the house shall be *dvibhumi*. This term is interpreted variously. We may be tempted to take that the house had two storeys and that thus box-seats were also provided for in the ancient theatre. But Abhinava, after giving the opinions of other scholars, quotes his own teacher's view and says that what Bharata means by that word is that the seats should be in gallery form, rising from the pit to the height of the *rangapitha*. But the real import of that term seems to be that the house contains two *bhumis*, the raised platform for the stage and the pit for the audience. Bharata paid due attention to the acoustic properties of the theatre also. He says that 64×32 h. is the maximum size for a theatre and that one should not exceed that measurement. He praises the middle-sized alone among the three kinds of houses. The reason he gives is this: "Constructors should not build a theatre of a greater size, for the *Natya* would become indistinct. If the hall should be very big, the actor's voice would either become indistinct or bad on account of the necessity for the actors to shout out. The colour of the face or the tune of the varying *rasa* and *bhava* would become indistinct owing to the largeness of the house. Therefore, of all halls, the middle-sized is the best, for here the instruments and songs would be heard beautifully well." Again he says that the stage should be like a cave in a mountain without very large windows, so that there might be a clear and audible sound effect. Even the windows should be fitted with apertured doors so that there might not be too much air. In this connection we may observe that Dr. Keith's connecting this dictum of Bharata that the hall should look like a cave with the Ramgrah Hill Cave once used for recitation, etc., is pointless.

As regards permanent fittings, if we go through the further chapters of the *Natyasastra*, we see that in this respect also the Ancient Indian theatre was remarkably equipped. The 23rd Chapter deals elaborately with dress, masks, ornamented decorations, paint-

ing and shading of faces, beards, etc. The introduction of birds and animals according to the situation technically called *Sanjiva* is described. Clothes, arms, and all sorts of accessories made of stiffened cloth, wood, metal, mud and wax are then described. Chapter 35 towards the end deals with the workmen, craftsmen, artisans and artists attached permanently to a theatre or a dramatic troupe. The garlander, goldsmith, painter, carpenter, washerman and others are here mentioned.

The *Vishnudharmottara* mentions only two types of theatres. It says: "The *Natya* should be presented only in a theatre, and a theatre might be of two kinds, rectangular or square. The square should be 16×16 yds. The theatre should not be too small or too big, for there would be congestion in a small one and the show would become indistinct in a big one." The measurement given here for a rectangular theatre is not clear, the text being corrupt. This work does not mention the triangular theatre.

Narada's *Sangitamakaranda* mentions only the square theatre. It gives a new measurement, that this square theatre should be 48×48 yds. Thus according to Bharata this will perhaps be a *jyestha* type. Narada then adds that the *natyasala* must be richly painted with the eighty-four *bandhas* mentioned in the *Kamasutra*, or more likely the dance *bandhas* of the *Natyasastra*, inlaid with innumerable gems of diverse colours and decorated with chowries, flags and festoons. He gives the house four gates. In the centre there should be a raised platform, beautiful and perfumed, a twelve-yard square, in the middle of which the king's seat should be arranged.

Chapter X of Saradatanaya's *Bhavaprakasa* says that the palace of a king should have three kinds of theatres. This writer omits the rectangular type and has in its place the *vritta*, circular theatre. He opines that the king should have all the three types in his palace, each for a particular kind of dance and audience. He assigns to the circular theatre only the *chitra* variety of the *misra* dance i.e., the style in which both *marga* and *desi* are mixed. The audience in this theatre should be only males, consisting, besides the king, of proprietors of other theatres—*para-mantapikas*, and the

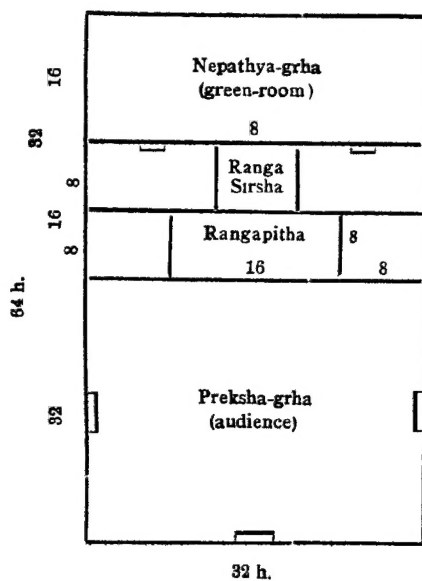
chief citizens. In the square type the audience consist of the king, courtezans, ministers, merchants, commander of the army, friends and the king's sons. Here all sorts of *misra* dance and music could be conducted. In the triangular, the audience with the king include the sacrificial priests, the preceptors, the king's harem and the chief queen. The dance conducted in this theatre should be of the *marga* style only.

The *Sivatattvaratnakara* of Basavaraja says that King Venkatappa built a theatre at Ikkeri. It describes the grandeur of that theatre, worked in ivory and sandal and inlaid with precious stones, having a garden around it, receiving enough light where it was wanted and with special artificial lighting arrangements in the darker portions. The whole house was beautified with paintings of various themes on the walls that looked like mirror.

The *Sangitachudamani*, an unpublished work on Music, seems to have dealt with the theatre. We have two verses from it describing *yavanika* (curtain) quoted in another available work on Poetics. The verses say that there should be a thick and beautiful curtain in front. Behind it, there should be two very thin and beautiful curtains looking just like thin mist. The first curtain is the front 'drop' which is removed as soon as the show begins. Behind the mist-like curtain, the *danseuse* performs the dance called *lasya*.

Thus an examination of the Sanskrit works on Drama, Dance and Music, gives us the certain idea that the words *natyasala* and *rangabhumi*, far from being merely imaginary or representing anything crude, represented beautiful theatres of various types, scientifically planned and richly decorated. It is wrong to assume that the *rasikas* and royal savants of old thronged by the highway tree and squatted on the street to witness the Sanskrit dramas of Kalidasa, Sudraka, and Bhavabhuthi, or to enjoy the graceful art of *abhinaya* and *sangita*, the science of which has been perfected in a vast literature.¹

¹ The *Silappadikaram* (Tamil classic) describes a small stage intended for dance, more or less square in shape. Three curtains are mentioned and measurements are also given. We shall deal with it in a further article.

ONE KIND OF *VIKRASHTA*—RECTANGULAR
THEATRE

Literature and Democracy

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I

When we remember Ruskin's warning against the mischief of 'masked words' which chameleon-like change their hue to suit the whim and fancy of each individual, no apology will, I believe, be needed for explaining the terms Literature and Democracy though they are so familiar and widely current. 'Literature' is here used in the usual restricted sense of 'elegant literature' or 'belles-lettres,' a body of writing "that has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect." 'Democracy' possesses here the same comprehensive meaning which Mazzini gave it when he defined it as "the progress of all, through all, under the leading of the best and the wisest." The term is here used as being applicable to the whole community that observes the principle of equality between man and man in the matter of all essential rights, out of which follow as a corollary the democratic State with the ultimate sovereignty vested in the community as a whole, and the democratic Government meaning "the Government of the people, by the people, for the people." It necessarily implies on the negative side the abolition of all special rights and privileges, the removal of all artificial barriers between man and man, and on the positive side the emancipation of the poor, submerged humanity.

It may be at once conceded that Literature in the past has flourished mainly under the patronage of kings and nobles. Whatever drawbacks may be pointed out in the ancient institution of Monarchy, its one redeeming merit has been this spontaneous homage always paid by kings to poets and scholars. Queen Elizabeth of England and King Louis XIV of France, to mention but two striking instances, have eternally endeared themselves to mankind by their literary patronage. In our own country, there